

A Czech-American Girl: Red, White, and Blue

Did you ever notice that the colors of the American flag, the Texas flag, and the flag of the Czech Republic are all red, white, and blue? In a world where there are so many colors used to represent many diverse people, the colors of red, white, and blue are used to represent three cultures of people who are very dear to me and who have made me who I am today.

She was only 8 years old when she came from Frenstat, in the Moravian region of the Czech Republic. The year was 1888. My Great-Grandmother, Elizabeth Konvicka, traveled over an ocean to the new world as a caregiver for a wealthier family as they journeyed to America for the first time. She left her own family and set off for the adventure of a lifetime, she would never see her parents or family in Czechoslovakia again. Upon landing in Galveston, Texas, I have been told that she marveled at the beauty of Texas. She would later come to Central Texas, to the community of West, where she would meet and marry her husband, Cyril Karlik, of Frystat, Czechoslovakia (born in 1878). They would settle in the hills around West, near Aquilla and make their farm and raise their family.

As Cyril and Elizabeth raised their family, they practiced many Czech traditions. They held *besedas*, or Sunday gatherings, where women would cook fine Czechoslovakian foods and have dances to lively polkas and waltzes. They often made sausage in very large quantities for magnificent wedding feasts. Home-made sour kraut and fresh *kolaches* and *butchtas* were made by the ladies of the West community, a tradition that is still practiced today. They enjoyed their *pivo* (beer) and cooked meals together with their friends and neighbors.

My Grandfather, Jerry Gerik, was one of the grandchildren of Cyril and Elizabeth Karlik. He fought in World War II and made his home not far from his Mother's house on the vast farmland that he worked as a young man. He married Irene Muehlstein (daughter of Jacob Muehlstein of Linz, Austria, and Katherine Mikesh of Czechoslovakia). They had seven children. Grandpa Gerik can still speak the Czech language. He farmed all of his life and has handed his skills down through the ages to his sons and grandsons who still farm today.

My family and I like to travel to places to learn about different cultures and customs here in America. We always go to at least one place in Texas each summer to appreciate our Texan culture. One of our favorite places is Pedernales Falls in the Texas hill country, where we visit the German community of Fredricksburg. We camp and go to Luckenbach, Texas, to listen to Texas music and buy local goods. We also like to go to at least one destination around America during our vacation. We have visited South Dakota, Florida, Louisiana, Alabama, and Oklahoma, (to name a few). We always learn something about the places we visit and appreciate the unique people we meet.

To me, being Czech-American means that we hold our family and traditions very dear to us and that we are a strong people. We work hard, care for one another, and know that our heritage is deep and true. I look forward to dancing the Czech dances next year, when I will be able to represent my community of West as a "Junior Historian" dancer. This is a local group that has learned Czech dances throughout the years and passed them along to each other for over 30 years. I will wear a *kroj*, the traditional dress, and wear a floral wreath with ribbons in my hair (as young unmarried girls do according to the custom). I

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would love to visit the capital of Czechoslovakia, Prague. I have read about it and know it is a beautiful place. I know that Czechoslovakia is nestled between Poland and Germany, rich in history and tradition. Czechoslovakia has a history that has been troubled by struggle, but the spirit of the Czech people has made them who they are today. My grandmother, Deborah Gerik Janek, visited there a few years ago and said that it was like "going home", and was very similar to our community here in West.

I was very close to the West Fertilizer Plant on April 17, 2013 when it exploded. We were knocked off of our feet and thrown across the ground. My brother was injured as he was pinned between two walls of a house. We were so scared, but knew we had to flee to safety. Our home was very badly damaged and will take months to rebuild. The windows and doors blew glass and wood everywhere. It is hard for me to see it without doors or windows. Many homes have to be torn down, and our schools will have to be rebuilt as well. Our beautiful community is broken.

We are thankful that we are alive, and our hearts hurt for our family and friends who lost loved ones and our first-responders. I have learned that in the past Czechoslovakia has experienced explosions, probably like this one, even if it wasn't caused by what ours was. I can't imagine how it might feel as a young girl in a war-torn country. I hurt for people who have lived through explosions now. I see how it can change their lives. We have all experienced pain, we have all experienced loss.

I believe that in the future, citizens of West can learn much from the citizens of the Czech Republic, and they may learn from us as well. I would like to meet children my age who live in the Czech Republic, and learn to speak their language. We probably have much in common! The people of West are strong because of the Czech culture and their heritage. It would be really amazing to visit the roots of my family and see for myself where these strong and vibrant people receive their culture and customs.

So you see, I am very proud to be a descendant of Czechoslovakia, a native Texan, and an American. I believe that everything I am is represented by places I have been, and things I have learned about many people in the world. Czechoslovakian playwright and later President of Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel, once wrote, "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out". I believe that because the people of Czechoslovakia have experienced difficult times and have been able to still build a strong community that the people of West, too, can do the same.

Our American flag is red, white, and blue.

Our Texas flag is red, white, and blue.

Our Czechoslovakian flag is red, white, and blue.

Our blood is the same, and our spirit is strong because of it.

Děkuju (Thank You),

Mary Kathleen Janek, Age 14

West, Texas

